

Frequently Asked Questions: Timothy Coleman Furniture

1. How did you first get interested in furniture making?

I enjoyed making things from an early age. I had a workshop in the basement where I could escape the clamor of a house with four siblings. I immersed myself in projects, cutting up scraps of wood and piecing together little sculptures. I wanted to learn more about how to work with wood and engage in something that felt so natural, but it was hard to find instruction

After finishing an undergraduate degree in writing in 1983, I was compelled to find ways to work with my hands and build things. I sought out homebuilding sites and asked if they were hiring. I learned to build houses that way, and I remember bringing home scraps of cedar siding and cobbling together a little desk. It was so satisfying to make something that I could use, and I loved the process of taking an idea, gathering materials and going to work. Time would zip by.

2. Do you have any formal training?

I moved to Seattle, WA in 1985, and for the first time, I met people who were making their living by designing and building furniture. I was lucky to work as an apprentice for a year to Curt Minier where I learned some furniture making basics. He was quite artistic and expressive with his designs, and he introduced me to the world of contemporary furniture by suggesting books and magazines to read.

Shortly after beginning my apprenticeship in Seattle, I attended a presentation by renowned furnituremaker James Krenov. The way he talked about wood and the spirit that he brought to his work resonated with me. I took a summer course at the College of the Redwoods (now the Krenov School) where Krenov was teaching, and then I attended the full-time program from 1987-89.

3. Where do you make your furniture now?

My current workshop, which I built in 2000, is a 1000 square foot building adjacent to my home in a rural part of western Massachusetts. I work alone there for the most part. I have heavy duty, well-tuned machines to process material and do joinery. I am often working on relatively small, complex projects, so the machines don't get really heavy use and they stay the way that I set them which I like.

There's enough room in the shop for several small to medium size projects to be in process at once, but the shop is configured in a way that I can also work on rather large pieces. Last year I was building two large tables – one 12' long with leaves extended, and the other 10'. By the end of the project they took up every available inch of the workshop and I could barely move in there! It's nerve-racking when there are many months of work that could be damaged quite easily by moving about the workshop carelessly.

4. Are there any particular types of materials or tools that you like to use and why?

I love working with veneer that I cut on my 24" band saw. This thick veneer allows me to do many things that I couldn't with commercial veneer, such as beveling the edges of pieces and doing shallow carving into the surface.

Thick veneer is a part of many of my designs, and I am set up well to create and work with it. I have a small wide belt sander, and most of my pressing is done with a vacuum press. The techniques I have developed with thick veneer and how I use it for decorative effects are hallmarks of my work.

5. What drew you to marquetry?

I learned to do marquetry at the College of the Redwoods. It wasn't taught, per se, but anyone who wanted to learn had access to instructors who could teach them. I learned the double bevel method, and it was all done with a hand saw and a birds mouth platform. There were some wonderful marquetry pieces made at the school around that time, and I was inspired to see what I could do with it.

I often work with shifting grain direction to create patterns and achieve effects rather than making more complex pictures with multiple woods. I combine marquetry with parquet work as well, such as in my cabinet "Summer" ([include hyperlink here to Summer](#)) with silhouettes of dragonflies on a parquet background.

6. How did you get involved with historic recreations? (include hyperlink to historic recreation page)

The recreation pieces I have built are commissioned works for historic homes throughout the US.

In 2012, I was hired to recreate a pair of large tables that were missing from a Frank Lloyd Wright home in Buffalo, New York. That led to other jobs in that vein, including a room full of French Provincial style furniture for the Dwight Eisenhower Historic site in Gettysburg, PA.

Recreating historic pieces represents a shift in the way that historic homes are curated. There is a new willingness to recreate missing pieces rather than have the spaces vacant. This gives museum visitors a more complete feeling for the home. They are well paying jobs that bring me into the museum and conservation world, which I find interesting.

With missing furniture pieces, we may start with old grainy photos or a significantly altered remainder of the original. There's a lot of detective work before anything is made. Often I learn techniques from these projects that I incorporate into my own work, such as the use of lumber core substrates for veneer work, which is how the Wright tables were built.

7. Do you prefer working on commission or doing speculative work?

I like both, about in equal measures. Sometimes one informs the other. I have often taken a commissioned design and further developed it in a speculative piece. I like the flow of ideas that happens when working with a client and meeting a practical need, and I love the feeling of exploration and discovery in my own work.

8. How does your commissioning process work?

I try to keep the process as streamlined as possible. A client often comes to me with a photo of something they have seen or their own rough sketch. We look to pieces that I have created to help determine shapes, woods and finishes, then I try to distill things to a single design. I used to offer more options, but too many choices can be hard for some people, and it's more work for me. With a single design we can make adjustments based on their feedback.

9. How does your design process work?

My design process follows closely to what I learned from Krenov, which he referred to as "composing."

Initial sketches are developed into a full-size, rough mockup to get an idea of scale and volume. From there I come up with a flexible plan for how to build the piece. This is a general sequence of steps, and I usually begin the work without knowing all the details. I want the freedom to improvise and make discoveries along the way.

I'm a curious person, and that drives a lot of my designs: "I wonder how it would look if I tried it this way?" It's a dynamic and engaging process, but there can be doubt and confusion along the way when things don't feel resolved.

10. Which woods do you most like working with and why?

If it's a commission, wood choice is guided by the desires of the client and the function of the piece. I will make suggestions based on what they are asking for and what else is in the room where the piece will reside. I show samples of what I have on hand, generally steering them toward woods that I like to work with or am eager to work with.

In my own work, the choice often has to do with the mood and details of a piece. Am I expressing something that is vibrant and bold or subdued and quiet? The material can steer things one way or another.

I work with a lot of cherry, figured maple, bubinga, white oak, pear, yew, walnut, English sycamore. This could be a long list! I avoid woods that are hard on my machines and hand tool blades. They are much more time consuming to work with, but if it is what the customer wants, such as teak, then I comply. I have some woods on hand that I am dying to work with, but the right ideas haven't presented themselves yet. Fortunately there is no expiration date for wood!

11. What sort of finishes do you prefer and why?

I do not have spray equipment, so all my finishes are applied by brush or pad. I use a lot of shellac, mixing small batches from flakes. It's best when freshly mixed.

My other staple is a tung oil and urethane mixture. There's a company in Vermont, Sutherland Welles, and I buy a container of their tung oil product and a container of gloss urethane, intermixing them depending on the application. If the surface needs more durability, there's more urethane in the mix. If I want more of a low sheen oiled look, then I use more tung oil. It's a versatile and forgiving finish that can be repaired easily. Lately I have been using it for some high gloss finishes. I need to be extremely careful to keep the dust down in the workshop for a day before brushing on the finish to save time in the rubbing out phase. I also use dyes on figured wood to create interesting color effects.

12. What inspires you and where do you get your ideas from?

Much of my inspiration comes from being surrounded by and immersed in nature. I work with a lot of plants around my property, and I love seeing how they change through the seasons. Natural forms such as leaves, and flowers often find their way into some of the decorative motifs that I use. Nature informs the structure of my furniture as well as decorative elements—gracefully tapering legs that are almost leaf-like, structural elements that are thicker where they join other parts, like a tree branch as it emerges from the trunk.

Travel is always inspiring, too. Asian and Islamic art and design have always been major influences on my decorative surfaces, and a trip to Istanbul a few years ago inspired a decorative cabinet called “Arabesque” that used design motifs similar to what I saw there. Also, historic furniture styles – Art Deco, midcentury modern, and 18th Century French among them.

13. What is your favorite project and why?

Usually I say that my favorite is whatever I am currently working on. And it's true, because the fresh engagement with ideas and process is invigorating. But going back, I would look to a cabinet I made in 1991 titled “Fluted Cabinet.” **(include hyperlink here to fluted cabinet)** It's a cabinet on cabinet in white oak and maple, with a single coopered door on the upper maple cabinet.

I hand planed deep flutes into the convex surface of the door with a custom made fluting plane. The work was full of discoveries and new techniques and I couldn't pull myself away until it was done. It's also a favorite because it was the first major speculative piece that I created in my own independent workshop.

14. What is the most challenging project you have worked on and why?

The most challenging was a cabinet on a stand titled “Yew and Me.” **(include hyperlink to Yew and Me)** It's actually *two* elliptical cabinets nestled together on a lattice-like stand. Technically, it was nearly impossible to build. It also had complex carvings around the borders of the cabinets

to make it even more difficult to pull off. I was using a new technique where I applied a layer of English sycamore veneer over a yew wood substrate, and then carved away sections of the sycamore to create patterns in the yew. There were over 24 lineal feet of carved borders, and it took over a month to do the carving alone

15. How does teaching fit into your work as a furnituremaker?

I have enjoyed teaching for more than 30 years at a variety of schools around the country. I encourage students to be curious about what they are doing, and to explore different ways to approach a certain task. My goal is that they learn and develop techniques that expand their way of expressing themselves with woodworking and furniture.

When I am teaching surface embellishment techniques, there's a lot of experimenting in the class. Students are inspired by each other, which is always fun to see. In the future, I would like to do more teaching directly from my studio in an intensive small group format which is the format I enjoy the most.

16. What do you do when you're not making furniture or teaching furnituremaking?

I live in an area where there are many small farms, rivers and hills that define the landscape. I spend a lot of time exploring the back roads on my bicycle. I also spend a lot of time with my family, enjoying simple pleasures such as good food, sunsets, snowfalls, and starry nights.